

# “The Room Where It Happens”: Doctoral Students’ Journey to Community-Engaged Research

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**Abstract:** Doctoral education in social work equips students to be stewards of the discipline through training in practice, policy, and research methods. In this article, we, as two doctoral students, reflect on our research practicum coursework. As fans of the musical *Hamilton* (Miranda, 2015a), we were struck by the parallel of gaining access to “the room where [research] happens” (Miranda, 2015c) and offer commentary on the historically exclusionary practices of the empiricist-driven academy. While learning the research process, it became obvious and disconcerting that doctoral education in social work focuses on teaching students how to engage in primarily positivist, empiricist, generalizable research. However, this epistemology does not align with most social work scholarship agendas. Through critical consideration of personal and professional values, we posit that the social work profession has a responsibility to infuse humanizing, community-engaged research methods and offer points of reflection educators may consider to enhance their research courses.

**Keywords:** doctoral education, research methods, community-engaged, humanizing research

*[To the tune of “The Room Where It Happens” (Miranda, 2015c)]*

*Four doc students and a professor walk into a class / a research topic posed, so / they emerge with a study, having opened doors that were previously closed, whoa / the students emerge with newly discovered research power / questions they can shape however they want / the class emerges with some pubs / and here’s the piece de resistance: / no one else was in the room where it happened ...*

During the spring and fall of 2021, the two of us—along with two other doctoral students—engaged in a research practicum course. Due to the continued pandemic, the four of us met with our professor weekly via Zoom and engaged with various content and exercises that allowed us to experience the conceptualization, development, and implementation of a survey-design research project. Throughout this experience and the safe environment created by this cohort of people, immense learning and growth occurred in accordance with, and beyond, the intended learning objectives of the course.

As the product of continuous reflexive conversation, this narrative contains the important reflections of two of the doctoral students’ experiences with conducting research within the constraints of a classroom environment and recognizing that while we were granted access to “the room where [research] happens” (Miranda, 2015c), the communities that would be impacted by our work were not. With an irony that is not lost on us, this narrative demonstrates how the courses that were charged with teaching us how to do research became the very courses in which we discovered how we do *not* want to do research. At many points throughout the last year, there was a stark recognition of the absence of critical voices involved in our research project. As emerging scholars who both value and prioritize critical examination of who is at the

table and who is perpetually excluded, we could not help but feel this extraordinary weight of power, where “decisions are happening over [class]” (Miranda, 2015c, line 24) and our participants and target population were just “pieces that are sacrificed” (line 76) in the research process. It became alarming to us, that even with our best intentions and ethical consideration, as scholars we run this risk of harming communities if we do not bring them with us into “the room where it happens” (line 48). This is the journey of how we discovered and solidified our personal research values of conducting social work scholarship from a humanizing and community-engaged approach.

It is our understanding that the guiding purpose of social work doctoral education is to train students as scholars and prepare them to be future stewards of the discipline (Group for the Advancement of Doctoral Education in Social Work [GADE], 2013). GADE recommends that social work doctoral program should emphasize “skills and knowledge in the following areas: in-depth knowledge of social work as a profession and discipline, research and scholarship, and teaching” (GADE, 2013, p. 2). Doctoral students, like us, enter PhD programs with varied experience, especially when it comes to conducting research. Many of us have spent our tenure as students consuming knowledge. Now, we have reached a point where we are being trained and prepared to be generators and creators of knowledge. Research methods courses provide critical opportunities for students to pull back the curtain, demystify the research process, and learn “how the sausage gets made,” (Miranda, 2015c, line 45) so to speak. Thus, in our experience, our program coursework culminated with a research practicum course that spanned two semesters. Through this practicum, with the guidance of our professor, we were tasked with navigating the research process from question conception through manuscript completion. As students, we were provided with a broad topic (social justice in social work education) from which to generate four individual research questions, one cohesive survey instrument, and a comprehensive research plan.

This prescribed topic of social justice in social work education was of interest to all four students engaged in the course. While we are just two of the four students that participated in this course, the desire to do something meaningful and beneficial for the field was a strong priority of all of us. Social justice is infused in all our personal and professional values (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2017) and as humans, we have a desire to “build something that’s going to outlive” (Miranda, 2015c, lines 132–134) ourselves and make an impact.

The first order of business was for the four students to arrive at individual research questions underneath the broader umbrella of social justice in social work education. This process was necessary within the context of course instruction to ensure an equitable learning experience for all students and for the practicality of issuing individual grades for each student—the goal being that at the end of the course, each student would have had the experience to write research questions, collect data and analyze data, and draft individual manuscripts as an artifact from the course. However, the reality of building consensus among four different doctoral students, operating from varied epistemological frameworks, with different identities and lived experiences, was quite challenging. After weeks of iteration, we emerged with a study that

would examine MSW students’ experience with campus racial climate, racialized stress, anti-racist behavior, and social justice orientation at Council on Social Work Education (CSWE)-accredited programs. We created our collective survey comprised of validated scales that would measure the constructs necessary to address our individual research questions.

For the two of us, the entire research process felt like it was lacking something. There was a persistent nagging that something was missing; we were neglecting a critical piece of this process. Through our coursework thus far, it has been our impression that the academy, as an exclusionary institution upholding white supremacy, mimics law-making institutions as it precludes others from accessing decision-making positions of power. Most particularly it has historically been exclusionary of under-resourced populations such as Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC); disabled people; LGBTQ+ people; and lower-income people—including within the field of social work (Cnaan & Ghose, 2018; Garrow & Hasenfield, 2017; San Pedro & Kinloch, 2017; Tuck, 2009). We have learned that as a formative field, social work has an identity crisis of sorts. As I (Kattari) continue to engage in coursework and with colleagues, there is a noticeable tension among scholars in the field. This tension culminates into a give-and-take in order to gain credibility within the academy; social work doctoral education is pulled in a more empiricist direction, prioritizing traditional research methodologies that focus on the concept of objectivity and generalizability (Cnaan & Ghose, 2018; Garrow & Hasenfield, 2017; Goodman, 2015; Gurrero, et al., 2018; Okpych & Yu, 2014). However, not all within the field agree with this approach, and many social work researchers, including us, prioritize more constructivist approaches to research recognizing that objectivity and neutrality are merely impossible, as human beings cannot disconnect their identities and experiences from influencing the research process (Cnaan & Ghose, 2018; Garrow & Hasenfield, 2017; Paris & Winn, 2014).

As a group in class, we continued circling back to reality that we were a majority White group of researchers attempting to address questions of anti-Black racism, racial justice, and racialized experiences of students. We never brushed over or ignored this reality; however, we always found a way to move past it. I (Kattari) kept feeling like we weren’t the right group of people to be exploring questions around students’ experiences of racism and in particular Black students’ experiences of racism. I felt very unsettled by this.

When it came time to pilot-test our survey, I (Tanis) came face-to-face with the unsettling feeling Kattari was also feeling. I am a White woman. My research question explored racialized stress of MSW students, and our survey development had been developed by all non-Black minds. Regardless of the use of validated scales, my embodied experience as a White person limits my understanding of the potential risks of this inquiry. As I prepared to send the survey to friends and colleagues for testing, I suddenly felt uncomfortably voyeuristic and felt an intense resistance and refusal to ask friends and colleagues of color to engage with the questions on our survey instrument. In a moment of reflexive processing, the following text exchange occurred between the two authors (content warning: refers to the state-sanctioned murder of a Latino child):

Tanis: Also, there’s no way I’m sending my Black friends our survey today. Can’t do it. Won’t do it.

Kattari: Yeah, I’ve been putting that off too.

Tanis: I was like, oh I’ll wait till Friday. THEN THE WORLD SEES FOOTAGE OF ADAM TOLEDO’S MURDER. Nope. I refuse.

Kattari: Yeah, I’d also be interested in a discussion [about] what our responsibility is as a team of non-black scholars exploring primarily anti-black racism. It’s not sitting well with me.

...

Tanis: Yeah, I agree. But there’s no space for [community engaged and informed research] with this project and it feels voyeuristic and inappropriate.

...

Tanis: I think the fact that I have a visceral reaction to asking my friends to take this survey this week, is telling. I can’t expect strangers to take it if I am not comfortable subjecting people I love to it.

Kattari: Yep exactly. And it sucks and it’s important learning and reflection we should always be doing as scholars so while it’s uncomfortable it’s reminding me how important reflexivity is in research.

(J. Tanis & L. Kattari, personal communication, April 2021)

We were beginning to recognize that through the manufactured research experience that occurs within a course context, we were forced to allow course objectives, deadlines, and assignments direct our work, rather than creating space for community members to define the needs of the project. This moment of processing was an important catalyst to spur further discussion among the larger research team within the course. In this acknowledgment of tension and ethical concern, Kattari reminded us both of an important tool used to situate yourself, the researcher, within the context of your work: “The Pedagogy of Pause: Why this question? Why this moment? Why Me?” (L. C. Curiel, personal communication, October 30, 2020). The reality was, I (Tanis) could not answer those questions in a way that justified the potential harm my personal research question would cause to potential participants. This created discomfort and ethical concerns that led to some significant changes to research questions and survey design. I credit the class process for providing the time and space to process this as group, but it is important to address that this process does not always happen.

Scholars do not necessarily have a robust team with whom they can process how conflicting ethics and values impact their work and Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) that are meant to protect participants may not always catch the nuance embedded within some of these studies. I (Tanis) assert that a willingness to engage in humility and vulnerability is necessary to recognize you are not the right researcher for a particular project. Further, a willingness to engage in personal positionality and humanizing methods are essential for owning how our personhood and lived experiences impact our ability to carry out ethical research while acknowledging and honoring the full, authentic, and unapologetic humanity of our participants and target populations. For me, it was crucial to acknowledge myself as a White scholar trying to examine anti-Black racism within the context of a historically racist institution. The infusion of my

positionality, alongside the recognition of participants’ full humanity, was necessary to avoid harm. However, if we insist that empirical scholarship must remain value-free, as empiricism suggests, we run the significant risk of denying the humanity of our participants and using rigor to justify continued harm to historically oppressed groups of people.

Our experience affirms Goodman’s (2015) position that US-based social work doctoral programs train students in more empiricist approaches that uphold the status quo in prioritizing fundable research rather than what we find most important, which is humanizing research. We feel that empiricist approaches to research often dehumanize under-resourced populations, create scholars whose research is disconnected from applicable social work practice, and do not focus on addressing social problems (Goodman, 2015). Additionally, Garrow & Hasenfield (2017) argue that empiricist methodologies lack an analysis that integrates the influence systems and structures have on upholding power, privilege and oppression, a foundational value in social work education at all levels. This value of acknowledging systems is one that both of us share as scholars with a range of positionalities that impact how our research is situated.

It became important for us to reflect on how our personal values as scholars aligned with the general values of the broader social work research community. A throughline we observed is the necessity of collaboration and partnership with communities and clients. The Society of Social Work Research (2018) asserts that collaboration between “researchers, practitioners, and stakeholders (e.g., communities, policy makers, clients, and other stakeholders) improves the quality of both research and practice” (p. 2). The Grand Challenges calls on both scholars and practitioners to “collaborate with individuals, community-based organizations, and professionals from all fields and disciplines” (Grand Challenges for Social Work, n.d., About section).

Further, some social work scholars have explored what it means to do values-based research (e.g., Shannon, 2013). We have found that in academic spaces, where values-free paradigms can be considered more rigorous, this can be perceived as a controversial stance. We identify with scholars such as Shannon (2013), who posits five primary approaches that help align research to social work’s professional mission and values: These approaches include action research, participatory-action research, constructivist research, empowerment research, and emancipatory research. Drawing on our professional value that “social workers engage people as partners in the helping process” (NASW, 2017, Ethical Principles section, para. 13), we believe that these approaches emphasize that social work research should be shaped, guided, and conducted by participants. This humanizing approach that utilizes community-engaged methods best aligns with our values.

We recognize that social work scholars who prioritize a humanizing approach to research always seem to be fighting for legitimacy. As doctoral students, there is an unspoken “pressure to deliver” (Miranda, 2015c, line 118). The job market is ever looming in the distance, and we all want to be prepared and competitive. This research practicum was marketed in a way that, if done well, each student could leave with multiple publications (including a first author pub!). This is incredibly alluring. To be fair, the exposure to the research process is also very alluring. We do not deny that learning practical skills such as IRB navigation, survey development and

dissemination, data cleaning and analysis, and navigating the real challenges of team management is incredibly beneficial. It may be fair to say, however, that many of us felt we had much to gain from this course; this also means we had much to lose if it was not done well. And, if the traditional definition of academic success has been largely associated with number of publications, journal impact factors, and the like, this also may have been a large motivation behind the quest for rigor and empiricism. There was a continued push and pressure among course participants to seek generalizability as this gold standard goal. Yet, as students in the context of this manufactured research experience, we found ourselves asking these questions, “In this fight for legitimacy, are we compromising our values? If so, is it worth it?”

As a group, we ultimately ended up proceeding with seeking a nationally representative sample. I guess “when you get skin in the game, you stay in the game” (Miranda, 2015c, line 126). We prioritized wrapping up survey design to move through the IRB process in hopes that we could begin participant recruitment before the end of the semester. Our recruitment plan primarily relied on cold call–style emails to a list of MSW program directors acquired from the CSWE website. While we had a few responses and questions in reply, for the most part it felt as though our recruitment email was sitting in a virtual abyss of summer break. Not only did we not have input from MSW students for the study, but we also missed an opportunity to engage MSW program directors or CSWE staff to help inform our recruitment strategy.

As with most social work practice, warm hand-offs are much more effective than cold calls—this is no different in research. While we discussed the challenges of recruiting students during summer break, we overlooked the challenge of communicating with faculty over summer break. Without intentionally formed partnerships and curated relationships, our only point of access to students was through MSW program directors’ email inboxes. The first round of recruitment emails was distributed in early July. Nearly 10 percent of faculty contacted for assistance with survey distribution had an out-of-office reply turned on, which indicated they were either on vacation, working modified summer hours, or responding to emails at a slower rate. Many faculty members are not paid through the summer months, and while many work, it is a flawed plan to assume their availability to engage in our recruitment needs. Further, we quickly recognized that we ran the risk of faculty serving as gatekeepers to our target population. One program director directly declined participation in the survey, without reason, indicating that they would not be distributing our email to their students. We considered the reality that some programs may not distribute surveys to their students as a way of protecting their students from the burden of being over-surveyed. Keeping in mind that we were still amid the COVID-19 pandemic, when it seems as though a survey was sent to students weekly, this is understandable. We could not help but wonder, though, given our survey inquiry about anti-Black racism, could programs be hesitant to distribute our survey out of concern for what students may report? Ultimately, our survey did not get the visibility or attention it may have received if distributed at a different point in the year or via a different method of recruitment.

Again, we all had a desire for quality data that would be useful and impactful to social work education. Remember, we felt passionately about our topic of inquiry. We deeply believed our work could affect meaningful and necessary curricular and program change that would promote

equity and student well-being within MSW programs. However, since this was most students’ first experience being “in the room where it happens” (Miranda, 2015c), our collective understanding of quality and rigor was persuaded by the empiricist approach to research methodologies taught to us in the doctoral program. As a result, we overlooked the importance of timing and scope. While we had discussions about the challenges of recruiting students during summer break, we decided to prioritize scope by recruiting a national sample. This made us need to recruit in ways outside of university-affiliated communication, to circumvent potential gatekeepers and provide participants with a more equitable opportunity to have their voices heard, relying on social media recruitment, which provided its own challenges.

There was a paradox of wanting to do meaningful yet rigorous (by empiricist standards) research within the constraints of course-based research. This led to a missed opportunity to create community partnerships and facilitate access to populations via trusted relationships. More substantially, this translated to the project being beyond a realistic scope, as well as lacking the desired rigor. Perhaps in this case, a pragmatic approach would have been more beneficial than one that prioritizes generalizability. If we kept a narrow target sample focus related to our own university where we had better access to students, it is possible our research could have maintained rigor while also providing quality data, even if it was a small sample. One of my (Kattari’s) biggest takeaways is that in learning environments, it is important to not do too much given the time constraints. Sometimes pragmatism is the most appropriate approach to a study, especially if community engagement is lacking.

As social work practitioners who worked in the field for many years prior to starting our doctoral program, we strongly believe that humanizing and community-engaged research aligns with the NASW (2017) *Code of Ethics* and upholds the professional values of the field. To uphold these values, we think it is necessary to utilize humanizing and community-engaged research methods throughout the research process. In this sense, research participants should have the opportunity to be “in the room where it happens” (Miranda, 2015c) as co-creators of knowledge (Wallerstein et al, 2020).

To uphold the NASW (2017) *Code of Ethics* we will conduct research in “service” (Ethical Principles section, para. 2) to the community as our forefront priority. To do this, the community must be present to inform our research questions rather than us making assumptions. We want to work from a “social justice” (para. 5) lens to challenge the status quo in research and in the academy that reinforces white supremacy and colonization. By integrating these humanizing approaches in our research methodologies and methods we hope to pursue research that minimizes the historically harmful impact on marginalized communities that has occurred in the name of science. Through humanizing and community-engaged research, we can uphold the “dignity and worth of a person” (para. 8) by recognizing that research participants are content-area experts through their lived experience and use this expertise to guide and inform the process and outcomes of our research. Additionally, we want to engage communities and individuals as co-creators of knowledge rather than research subjects. It is antithetical to social work values to conduct research in isolation from those with the lived experienced in which we want to center and explore. In this sense, we value the “importance of human relationships”

(para. 11) and how research can be mutually beneficial for both, us as the researcher, and for the participants. This approach emphasizes the potential of developing long-lasting relationships between the researcher and community that prioritizes benefiting the community. We believe that humanizing and community-engaged research can be an accountability tool that ensures our “integrity” (para. 14) as scholars. While we have our own individual areas of expertise, we may engage in research on topics that are outside of that content area. Humanizing and community-engaged approaches to research are important components of ensuring our continued growth and development in areas we may lack “competence” (para. 17).

As social workers, we are quick to leverage human relationships within the interpersonal practice context and then seemingly forget their necessity in our research agendas. As discussed earlier, social work scholars often engage historically marginalized populations in research. If we, as students, are critical of program directors serving as gatekeepers to our participants within the context of this specific project, we must also be critical of ourselves as gatekeepers of the research process. What is the point of gaining access to “the room where it happens” (Miranda, 2015c) if we immediately close the door and keep others out? It is naive to believe we independently create new knowledge. Even without intentionally crafted community partnerships, knowledge is co-created with research participants through the data and stories with which they entrust to us. Honoring this co-creation by engaging, empowering, and elevating marginalized communities through authentic partnership embodies and upholds our professional values, and our personal values too.

Humanizing and community-engaged research may require longer timelines to account for stakeholder engagement, group level-setting, differing opinions, and other unanticipated interruptions to the research process. Due to this, we have noticed academic systems and funding structures disincentivize or discourage scholars from engaging in this type of work. We interpret this deprioritized focus on community engagement as a pedagogical and curriculum issue. This focus of empiricism begins in the ways we are taught research via courses such as the one discussed in this manuscript.

As doctoral students who care deeply and passionately about the field of social work, we recommend social work doctoral programs take a more proactive approach to integrating humanizing and community-centered epistemologies, methodologies, and methods in the curriculum through centering these paradigms alongside positivism. We are not naive enough to think that community-engaged research will always be possible in the context of a classroom setting. In fact, we would argue the application of community-engaged research for course-based work is unrealistic as establishing authentic, trustworthy, and lasting relationships with community partners is just not feasible over the course of a semester, or even a couple of semesters. We posit that, while community-engaged approaches may not be realistic in this context, applying a humanizing approach and lens to research will always be applicable and it is our ethical responsibility as social workers to do so. In lieu of applied community-engaged approaches in coursework, reflexive pedagogy can be applied to doctoral student training by asking students to reflect on how projects could have incorporated community-engaged approaches had there been the appropriate amount of time and funding. Further, social work



doctoral students should be able to critique positivist approaches by reflecting on what is lost due to the lack of community engagement and participation. Lastly, in the absence of community-engaged approaches, we strongly encourage educators to challenge students to apply a humanizing lens on their research or, perhaps more importantly, ask whether it is ethical to pursue this research agenda without community voice.

As emerging social work scholars, as we “dream of a brand-new start” (Miranda, 2015c, line 167), we feel it is our responsibility to challenge the status quo that prioritizes empiricist approaches while upholding the values of our field.

For us, this responsibility means centering research from a humanizing and community-engaged approach. As doctoral students, we can “look at where [we] are” (Miranda, 2015b, line 22) now and the values we seek to uphold as scholars by looking “at where [we] started” (line 23) in a course designed to walk us through the entirety of the research process. Due to our experiences in this course, we can more confidently aspire to prioritize and promote humanizing and community-engaged research approaches moving forward. “[We] don’t pretend to know [all] the challenges” (lines 30–31) future research will present, however, perhaps we can find “peace of mind” (line 39) inviting communities as partners in “the narrative ... and that would be enough” (line 41, 47).

### **Acknowledgements**

The authors would like to thank Dr. Carrie Moylan, Kathryn Irish, and Jessica Saba for their open and vulnerable participation in the course referenced throughout this reflection. Without these honest interactions, the reflections in this manuscript would not have happened.

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